



Book Review:
***It Is The Bad Time*, Edited By Kazimir Lee Iskander**

By: **Craig Fischer**

Abstract

Bad Time focuses on horror, specifically the aim to cultivate a sense of dread in the cartoonists themselves. Again, Iskander from the book's foreword: "My mission statement was simple—every artist involved should write a comic that would contain at least one panel that was frightening or traumatic to draw. The comic itself didn't need to be traditionally horrific, although many would be." And they are, although not every story is equally successful at transmitting fear and trauma from artist to reader.

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REVIEWS

It Is the Bad Time

Edited by Kazimir Lee Iskander

Self-published

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REVIEWED BY [CRAIG FISCHER](#) AUG 2, 2016



In the fall of 2015, I curated an art exhibition at Appalachian State University titled “At the Junction of Words and Pictures: The Tenth Anniversary of the Center for Cartoon Studies”. The show was not an unqualified success—as a first-time curator, I made a few shaky decisions and underestimated the time it takes to helm an exhibition—but I’m still proud that hundreds came to Appalachian’s Turchin Center to see the art and the terrific creators and commentators associated with CCS (Rob Clough, Beth Hetland, James Sturm, Rio Aubry Taylor, Jen Vaughn) that I brought to campus. Maybe I’ll curate another exhibit sometime.

I feel like my curation of “At the Junction of Words and Pictures” taught me a bit about CCS’s priorities. As part of the show, I assembled a library of published books and comics by the cartoonists on display and by other CCS creators too. (Visitors to the gallery could both ogle art and

read comics; people could stare at the original art for the cover of Alec Longstreth’s *Basewood* and then sit down and read all of *Basewood*.) One of the books in the exhibit was Robyn Chapman’s *Drawing Comics Lab* (2012), a how-to book that subdivides important comics-making skills into 52 short exercises. Given Chapman’s long-standing connections to CCS (she’s a past CCS Fellow and faculty member), it’s no surprise that *Drawing Comics Lab* includes tips from Steve Bissette, Dakota McFadzean, Katherine Roy, Jon Chad, and other CCS luminaries.

The nugget of wisdom in *Drawing Comics Lab* that jumped out at me most, though, was a pull quote by James Sturm: “If you want to be a cartoonist, you have to do the work: you can’t just talk about your characters and plot, and research endlessly. You actually have to make finished pages and finish your comics” (62). Sturm’s words feel to me like the school’s core belief. The entire CCS curriculum is designed to get students to produce an enormous amount of art in their two years of enrollment—especially in the second year, when each student is expected to complete a long-form thesis project. It’s a whirlwind that faculty, students and graduates call “comics boot camp.”

In addition to straight-up hard work, another fundamental CCS principle is legibility. In the process of choosing cartoonists for the exhibit, I looked at a lot of art, most of which was visually direct, simple, and unobtrusive. CCSers don’t break the grid and experiment with layouts like Steranko, or focus on picture



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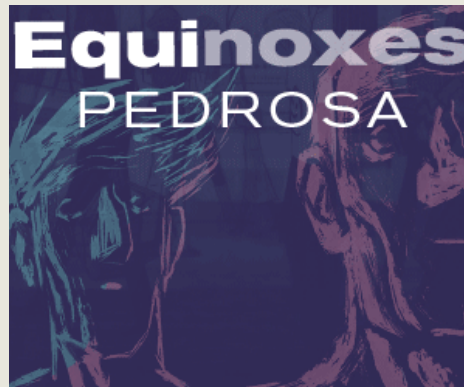
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plane aesthetics like *Kramers Ergot* contributors; they usually draw in an understated style, so that the visuals harmonize with, rather than overwhelm, the words. One track that CCS offers is “Applied Cartooning,” where the workload is the same as for those who aspire to be graphic novelists, but the emphasis is on using cartooning skills to present information in a variety of different professional settings, such as business, medicine, and education. In both the Applied Cartooning program and the more general track (“Artistic Cartooning?”), the CCS approach tends to emphasize clarity of purpose through clarity of imagery—in a word, legibility.

Hard work and legibility: we can use these traits to review a recent CCS anthology, *It Is the Bad Time* (2016), edited by then-student, now-graduate Kazimir Lee Iskander. In the book’s foreword, Iskander writes that he began to assemble *Bad Time* “after the first anthology project assigned to the students at the Center for Cartoon Studies,” and a subsequent e-mail to Iskander clarified that *Bad Time* wasn’t a class assignment. It was an extra, out-of-class project for students Anna Sellheim, Cooper Whittlesey, Tillie Walden, J.D. Lunt, Angela Boyle, and Iskander himself, all of whom have clearly internalized the CCS work ethic. (Emily Parrish is also a contributor, although she has not attended CCS.) These students make plenty of finished pages, in and out of class.

Bad Time focuses on horror, specifically the aim to cultivate a sense of dread in the cartoonists themselves. Again, Iskander from the book’s foreword: “My mission statement was simple—every artist involved should write a comic that would contain at least one panel that was frightening or traumatic to draw. The comic itself didn’t need to be traditionally horrific, although many would be.” And they are, although not every story is equally successful at transmitting fear and trauma from artist to reader.

The first story in *Bad Time*, Emily Parrish’s “Monstrum”, is about Edie, a college student and museum “night watchman” who is possessed by a necklace adorned with grinning humanoid figurines. The possession occurs in the opening two pages, and Parrish quickly shifts her attention to the grotesque ways Edie is manipulated by the evil necklace spirits. “Monstrum” is creepy because of what Parrish leaves out: her art is simple in the CCS-legible style, and she’s good at capturing gestures and facial expressions with very few lines while adding depth and texture to her pictures with conté crayon. Parrish’s story also walks a line between disclosure and (more commonly) a withholding of information: we never see Edie commit crimes, though the repeating motif of her freezer stuffed with leaking packages of meat tells us much of what we need to know.



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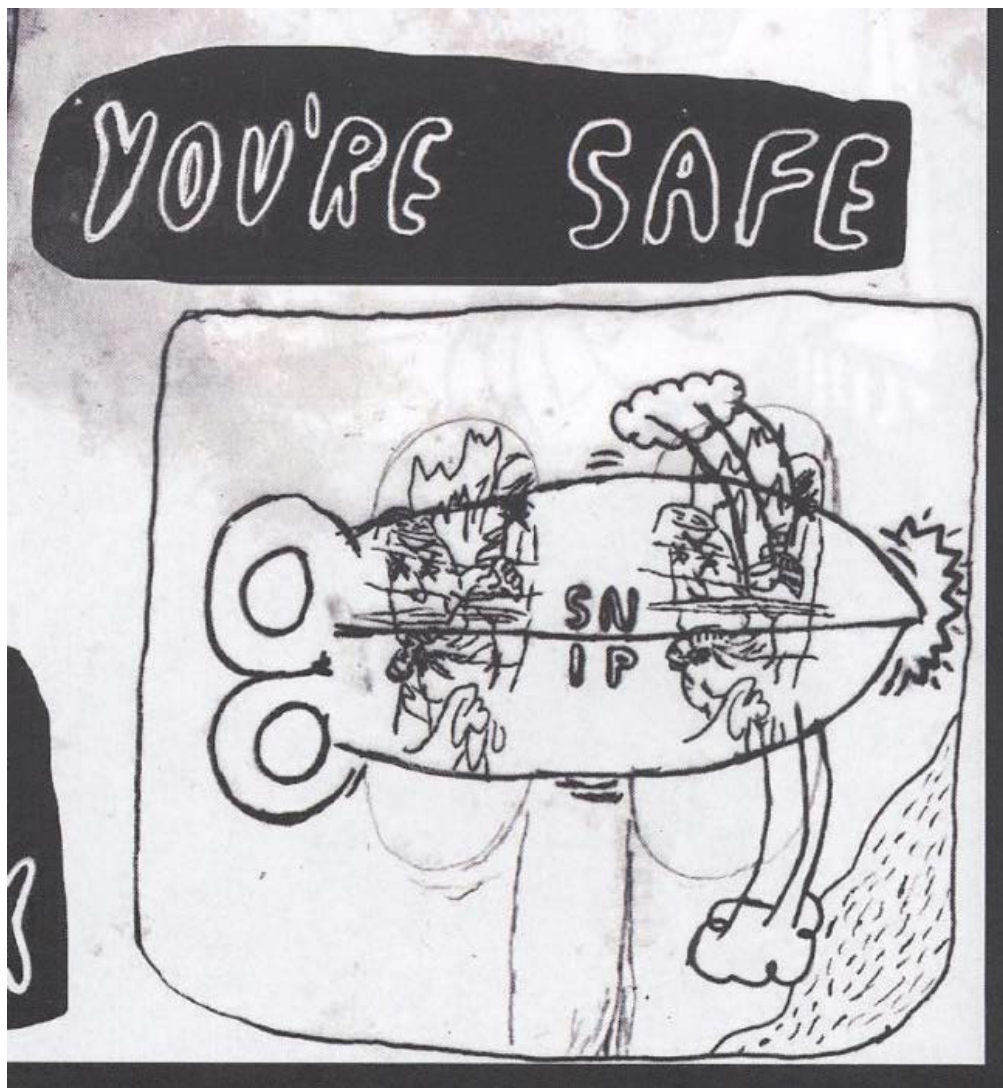
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BAD TIME page 10: Edie's crowded freezer.

Next is Anna Sellheim's "Wasted", and I'm reluctant to give away too much about this story, except to note that the horror here is existential horror, represented by the words "You're wasting time." (It makes sense that a CCS workaholic would find the words "You're wasting time" terrifying—consider the moment in the CCS documentary *Cartoon College* [Josh Melrod and Tara Wray, 2012] where James Sturm says that he thinks about death "all the time," because he's afraid he won't finish enough comics before he dies.) Sellheim's visuals are perhaps a little less confident than Parrish's, but the legibility is there; I can't imagine any readers confused about who and what inhabits Sellheim's panels.

Legibility breaks down, however, in Cooper Whittlesey's "Autopoeisis". In Whittlesey's narrative, laughing, silent figures with scissors menace the outside world, as our unnamed central character, locked inside his house, mistakenly believes that he's sheltered from society's collapse. It's a metaphor for white male cis privilege: on page 28, the senators' wife who "talked too much about ladie's [sic] rights" is sliced up, and a young Black male is dehumanized to the status of a "rubber toy" in the literal hands of a sadistic white cop. (Whittlesey underlines his message in *Bad Time's* contributors' notes, where he dedicates "Autopoeisis" to "everybody who has been hurt because of their skin color, gender, or orientation" [78].) By the end of "Autopoeisis", the smiling scissormen have arrived at the doorstep of our protagonist, leading to this final (spoiler!) panel:



BAD TIME page 34: The castration of the delusional white male.

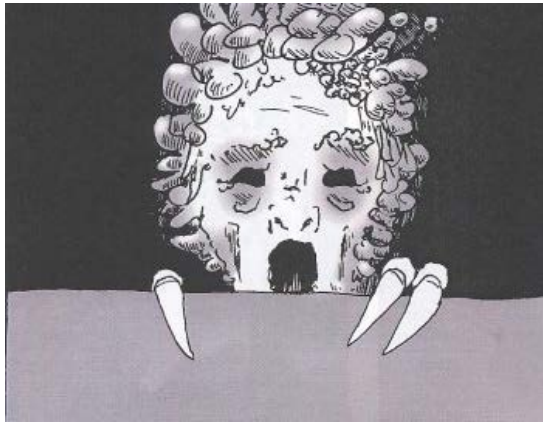
This panel embodies what I like and dislike about Whittlesey's visuals. The image of the fat scissors snapping shut without fingers operating them is a motif from earlier in the story (scissors snap shut by themselves in the panels with the senator's wife and the "rubber toy" boy), and the panel is a palimpsest, with faint pencil lines below the inked foreground hinting at the castration of the barricaded white man. Less effective, however, are those marks in the panel that are unreadable to me: the scribbles on the surface of the scissors include (I think) stick figures and motion lines, but their messiness is a distraction from the conclusion of "Autopoeisis". And what's that blanket/river in the lower right of the panel? There's energy in Whittlesey's primitivism, but I think his art would be more powerful if he eliminated clutter and focused on a simplified rendering of legible figures and objects.

Next is editor Iskander's "Ugly Boy", drawn in a brushy, accessible style. (Running "Ugly Boy" right after "Autopoeisis" shows the artistic diversity of *Bad Time* and the CCS community.) Iskander's story begins conventionally, if sadly. A typical high school student, Tang, witnesses the trials of a misshapen boy named Clement, who looks like a male version of Daniel Clowes's Tina in *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1993). Poor Clement is tormented by other students and even by his father, a coach at the high school. Iskander nimbly threads motifs throughout the story—the noise ("Thump Thump") of Clement hammering his head against the wall in frustration reoccurs with variation several times—but these motifs don't bring us to an expected conclusion. "Ugly Boy" finishes in a bizarre blast of body horror which captures Clement's overwhelming desire to be close to his father. Iskander's images are clean and legible, but the events he delineates are almost too freaky to understand, and thus supremely unsettling.

The shortest piece in *Bad Time* is "Muscles", a one-page vignette by Tillie Walden that reads like a contemplative, Goreyesque version of that early scene in Chester Brown's *Ed the Happy Clown* (1989) where Ed's leg blasts apart as he walks down the street ("Ack! I've accidentally broken my leg!!").

The second-to-last *Bad Time* story, "State College", is by J.D. Lunt, whose comics I first read in his self-published *Coping Mechanisms* (2015), about the ways (drawing abstract pictures, walking his dog) Lunt

deals with the PTSD he got while in the Army. Lunt's *Bad Time* tale seems at first more surreal, and more disconnected from the real world, than *Coping Mechanisms*: deafening noise dominates panels ("Squeak, squeak" written in jagged hand lettering), a boy masturbates while riding his bicycle, a dark, all-consuming shadow named M(other) draws a crowd to a desolate gas station. But wait: the title ("State College"), the underage sexuality, and the Nittany Lion t-shirts worn by the crowds that worship M(other) not-so-obliquely refer to Penn State, to Jerry Sandusky, to generations of abused boys. So "State College" really *is* about real-life horror.



BAD TIME PAGE 71: Ruth Gordon as the monster?

Bad Time ends with "Spores", a tale of plant-based terror by Angela Boyle, who edits *Awesome Possum*, a comics anthology dedicated to educational stories about the natural world. Boyle's also written and drawn a mini-comic about horseshoe crabs. "Spores", though, takes as much inspiration from horror movies as from biology classes. Claustrophobic apartment, sinister old woman, suspicious food, bodily invasion: "Spores" seems a chlorophyllic, bug-infested rewrite of Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Boyle's cartooning is legible in the stripped-down CCS way, but she gives weight to her images by applying

various shades of gray to skin, to upholstery, and to the weird mushrooms and flora growing under her protagonist's sink.

One unexpectedly entertaining aspect of Boyle's "Spores" is that it gets better as it goes along. Her first five pages are too cluttered with word balloons and multiple close-ups of her spooky old lady, but once Boyle shifts into silent panels, spot blacks, and weird-as-shit events, her artistry and our interest deepens. Watching a cartoonist grow like this makes it difficult for me to be objective about *It Is the Bad Time*. After learning what I have about the Center for Cartoon Studies, and studying art that charts the steady—and sometimes sudden and exponential—improvement of so many young cartoonists, it's tempting to put criticism aside and become a cheerleader for CCS and its graduates. But *Bad Time* stands as an accomplishment on its own, and not just because of its CCS pedigree: it's a good self-published collection, I hope Iskander edits another, and I'll follow these artists to their next projects.

For another take on *Bad Time*, see Rob Clough's review [here](#).

FILED UNDER: [Angela Boyle](#), [Anna Sellheim](#), [Cooper Whittlesey](#), [Emily Parrish](#), [J.D. Lunt](#), [Kazimir Lee Iskander](#), [Tillie Walden](#)

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